

# Child and Family Services Update

May 30, 2003

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## We Do Have a Choice! “Narrow-Minded Ways” or “Flexing”!

*By Richard Anderson*

How do you like that for a title? **“Narrow-minded people in their narrow-minded ways”** was a lyric in a song that came out of the sixties. It may have been before your time, but the sixties provided many songs that talked about thinking differently and moving out of traditional ways of thinking and doing. This, in part, was a piece of the “Civil Rights Movement,” which laid a foundation for more available human services and, specifically for our realm -- child welfare and domestic violence services. Unfortunately, we still are surrounded by some “narrow-minded ways,” which limit some of us who work within those systems who are not “narrow-minded people.” We are now actually trying to step out of old “narrow-minded ways” of thinking in delivering services into a new world of creating infinite new and exciting possibilities.

We who work in child welfare and domestic violence are ever challenged to think and act in new ways in addressing very specific unique situations in the lives of those we serve. Sometimes our creative work is stifled by a response from “the system,” -- “Sorry, no funding,” “Tried it before -- it didn’t work,” or “But we’ve never done that before!” We all know that, at times, these may be true statements. All budgets have limits. But all too often, these statements come from a “narrow-minded ways” system that has not promoted or encouraged more creative thinking. We would like your help in changing this. In order to provide singular, rare services that truly “fit” individuals and their unique circumstances we often need imaginative plans that work in special and individualized situations. We ask your help and open-mindedness now in helping us accomplish this in unrivaled and previously almost inconceivable ways.

Our Court Monitor, Paul Vincent, has often used the term “flexible funding” in inviting us to think in new ways about how to support plans that are uniquely fitted to the individual needs of those that we serve. The Milestone Plan designates a “Placement Prevention/Disruption Fund” (this is the same as “flexible funding”). Over the next few months we will be making a concerted effort to have everyone understand how we can fund uniquely fitted service plans using existing funds, but used in more creative ways. We will be “greasing the system” to make it easier for front-line staff to find support from administration to fund plans that fit distinctive strategies, designed by child and family teams. In fact, one of the criteria for accessing the funds will be the child and family team’s support of the plan, based on a sound functional assessment and previous exploration of all potential resources.

Training and mentoring for supporting these uniquely designed plans will begin in June and will go through the summer and into the fall. (No, this will not take you away from your work for long, and we promise to design the training to be as unobtrusive and helpful as possible.) We will begin the training with those who make the administrative funding decisions in each of the regions and the state office. By

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starting with this group, we hope to create a system that will more helpfully respond to the child and family teams as they create plans that need unique strategies. These unique funding concepts will become a more salient part of our Practice Model training.

We are now encouraging all members of Child and Family Services and the teams to begin thinking most creatively. This may include bringing in funds or services from other agencies. In the past, we have viewed this kind of approach as only relating to emergency needs, such as buying a bed to allow a child to stay with a relative, paying a month's rent to keep a family together, or whatever was needed in the very short-term to prevent removal or to prevent a foster placement/kinship disruption. Now, we need to ask ourselves, **“What kind of a plan would the child and family team design, if there were more support for the team’s creativity?”** For example, in addition to funding a short-term solution, the plan may include longer-term supports for an entire year, which could include paying for a relative to provide daycare, funding a tutor, paying for someone to provide a local service that is only available at such a distance that the child would have to be moved from their familiar surroundings, and many other uniquely matched service options. We acknowledge that in some offices this concept has already taken off, and they are supporting exceptional plans with great outcomes for children and families.

For a quick overview of the supportive documentation for the “Placement Prevention/Disruption Fund”, here are excerpts from the Practice Guidelines (for the entire guidelines, go to the Practice Guidelines on our Web site at [http://www.hsdcs.utah.gov/practice\\_guidelines.htm](http://www.hsdcs.utah.gov/practice_guidelines.htm)):

- “Placement Prevention /Disruption funds (PP/D funds) are uncommitted, non-categorical funds, available and easily accessible to caseworkers and the child and family team at the case level.”
- “The appropriate use of these funds is intended to assist in, and encourage the development of individualized, needs-based plans and practice.”
- “...the purpose of the PP/D funds is to promote the strengths-based, needs-based, individualized approach to practice and to assist in planning and implementing wrap-around services for children and families.”
- “...staff should remember that an underlying goal is to bring services to the child and family’s environment, rather than limiting parents, and especially children, to services that are [only] attached to a place or location.”
- “The only way to achieve customization for many families is to have the ability through flexible funds to create or craft new services, one child or family at a time”.
- “This capability can strengthen capacity to utilize more informal supports, capitalize on existing or promising personal relationships, and strengthen the provision of culturally relevant services.”

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The creative work of child and family teams will now be more supported in plans that are the best they can conceive of for providing safety, permanence, and well-being. Administrative staff, outside of the team, will be helping the caseworker and the team to find a way to support the financial parts of the plan. The result has to be better services. As I think about it, this kind of service is what you and I look for whenever we have a need -- something most specifically crafted to meet our individual situation and designed to match our unique needs. We don't like to hear, "Sorry, I know this is not what you need, but it is all we have!" We want to hear and, more importantly, see come to life and fruition something more like, "If this is what you feel would work for you and your family team, this is what we want, too, and we will put forth our very best efforts to tailor, modify, or create a custom-fitted solution that will help this to happen."